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The Former Yugoslavia: Some Historical Roots of Present Conflicts

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ABSTRACT: The media tend to cover current events without explanations or analyses. When they do attempt to do so, they often have an insufficient appreciation of the historical roots of such current events and of the slowness of social change. Their relevance is illustrated here by the presentation of a condensed survey of two thousand years of Balkan history.

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**THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA:
SOME HISTORICAL ROOTS OF PRESENT CONFLICTS***

by

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INTRODUCTION

The region to be examined here is the area of what was once the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; this includes Serbia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro. While we are flooded with a barrage of news of "ethnic cleansing" and mass slaughter in the former Yugoslavia, there has been little effort on the part of the media to place these events within a historic framework. Although current events are not examined in this paper, we hope that by exploring the history of this region we might shed some light on why it is currently experiencing such brutal conflicts. Whether these conflicts should be characterized as genocides or genocidal massacres will not become clear until they have run their course and fuller documentation becomes available.

THE INFLUENCE OF GEOGRAPHY

Situated in southeastern Europe on the eastern shores of the Adriatic Sea in the northwestern part of the Balkan peninsula, this region is bounded by Italy to the northwest, Austria and Hungary to the north, Romania and Bulgaria to the east, and Greece and Albania to the south. Its

* We thank the members of the Concordia genocide workshop for thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Of course, we alone are responsible for any errors that remain.

geography is open to entry from all directions: to the northwest the plains of the middle Danube afford a route from central Europe, to the northeast there is a wide corridor through Romania, Moldova and the steppes of the Ukraine, to the east one can travel on land through Bulgaria and Turkey, and to the west the Adriatic offers an easy passage by sea.

While this area is so open to entry, it also has a diverse internal geography full of mountains, steep gorges and narrow valleys. This natural environment helps account for a geo-political setting whose ethnographic make-up is remarkably heterogeneous. Among the different ethnic and national groups living in this region in the twentieth century are Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and Hercegovinans, Macedonians, Slovenes, Montenegrins, Albanians, Hungarians, Turks, Slovaks, Romanians, Gypsies and Jews. This diversity is further accented by the variety of religions adhered to in the population. In order to deepen our understanding of these cleavages it is useful to return to the past.

ANTIQUITY

Because of its geography, this region has always been open to invasion from both east and west. This is demonstrated by the Roman invasion of the Balkan peninsula in antiquity and later by the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Nazi occupations. In antiquity, this region was inhabited by Thracians, Illyrians and Celtic tribes. When the Romans first began to expand into the Balkans, they found several powerful Greco-Illyrian kingdoms occupying the Albanian coast. Although Roman attacks on these Illyrian tribes began as early as the third century B.C., it was not until the wars of Octavian in 35-33 B.C. that they were brought under Roman rule. Despite an attempt at rebellion, the Illyrians were completely subjugated

by 9 A.D. Illyria became a Roman province in the first century B.C.

The Romans continued to extend their frontiers beyond the Danube and even to the banks of the Dniester throughout the first and second centuries A.D., but later the defences in this region were fairly neglected and became thus prone to attacks by the Germanic tribes from the north and east. In 285 A.D. the emperor Diocletian, himself a native of Dalmatia, divided the empire into east and west. Although the emperor Constantine reunited the empire, a second division was made in 395 A.D. after the death of Theodosius with the empire being split between his two sons. The dividing line ran north-south from the Sava near Sirmium (Sremska Mitrovica) to Lake Scutari (Skadar) on the present Montenegrin-Albanian border and deeply affected the historical development of Europe:

This line became a permanent feature on the cultural line of Europe, separating Byzantium from Rome, the Greek from the Roman cultural heritage, the Eastern Orthodox from the Roman Catholic Church and the users of the Cyrillic script from those of the Latin.¹

The internal weakening of the Roman empire, resulting from the recession of economic life and the slow decay of state organization was also accompanied by persistent and growing attacks by different Germanic tribes on its borders. The Roman provinces in the Balkans were spared a direct attack by the Goths, who destroyed the boundary system along the lower Danube. However, the Goths were not able to withstand the Hun incursions from the steppes of Central Asia in 448 which brought widespread devastation to the area. Particularly hard hit were the towns in the northern regions, such as Sirmium (near present day Sremska

¹ Frederick Bernard Singleton, A Short History of the Yugoslav Peoples (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 11.



² This map was adapted from Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xiii. It shows modern political boundaries and some relevant locations in Antiquity.

Mitrovica), Singidunum (Belgrade), Naissus (Nis), Poetovio (Ptuj) and Emona (Ljubljana).

After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 476 A.D. and the establishment of the kingdom of the Ostrogoths under Theodoric in Italy, Dalmatia, Pannonia, and Noricum joined the kingdom. The Ostrogoths did not settle into the western Balkan provinces in any great numbers and had great respect for the old Roman system. Their rule brought a level of stability to the region, making it possible to repair the damage brought on by the Huns. Ostrogoth rule in the western part of the Balkan peninsula was interrupted by the emperor Justinian (527-565), the ruler of Byzantium. In 535 Justinian's fleet conquered Salona, the capital of Dalmatia. Within a short time all the Balkan provinces were ruled by the emperor. Justinian's rule was short lived, however. The emperor's massive military manoeuvres had left few troops to protect the territories bordering the Danube: the Huns had left the region sparsely populated and therefore more open to invasion.³

The Slavs took advantage of this situation by entering the Balkans. Basically an agricultural people, they were themselves frequently the victims of attacks by the nomadic hordes that swept across eastern Europe. It was as vassals of such nomadic tribes that the Slavs spread into southern Russia and Pannonia from an area located in what is now central Poland. By 517 A.D. groups of Slavs were crossing the Danube to raid in Thrace, Macedonia, Thessaly and Epirus. Slavs were also moving toward the Dalmatian coast. In an attempt to neutralize the threat caused by the Slavic invasion, imperial officials in Constantinople offered the Slavs on the

³ It is possible that the Hun attacks on the Balkan cities in Dalmatia were genocides or genocidal massacres, but there is not enough evidence to confirm this.

lower Danube the status of *foederati*, in which status they would act as paid border guards for the empire. The Slavs, however, chose instead to become vassals of the Avars, a new Turkic horde of nomads who appeared on the southern Russian steppe.

The Avars had successfully driven the remaining Germanic tribes from the Pannonian plain where they established a state that loosely controlled the Slavic settlers. Both the Avars and their Slavic vassals plundered cities and towns throughout the Balkans. The devastation seems to have been very widespread. John of Ephesus, a contemporary but not a witness to the Avar invasions of the Balkans, stated:

...today they still are established and installed in Roman provinces, killing, burning, and pillaging, having learned to make war better than the Romans.⁴

Usually, the ravaging of territory was followed by permanent Slavic settlements being made in the devastated villages. Between 591 and 602, the Byzantines made several attacks on the Avar-Slavic armies: all unsuccessful. The Slavs moved without resistance through the Balkan peninsula, populating it anew.

Although it is true that much of the indigenous population was killed or forced into slavery, many continued to live among the Slavic settlers. Others withdrew to the mountains or to remote regions: their descendants today are Albanians. Most of the Greek and Latin speaking populations took refuge in fortified Byzantine cities. Nothing is known of the fate of the Thracian people.⁵ There is considerable archaeological evidence that

⁴ John of Ephesus, quoted in John V. A. Fine, The Early Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1983), 31.

⁵ There is no evidence that adequately explains their fate, but it is possible that they were assimilated into Slavic society. Fine states that they simply "disappear from history." See V.A. Fine, The Early Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from

shows a cultural continuity from the pre-Slavic to the Slavic population and that, overall, the descendants of the indigenous population were assimilated into Slavic culture.

In 626 A.D. the Byzantines won a decisive victory against the Avars and the Persians, marking the decline of both these empires. It was also at this point that the Byzantine emperor Heraclius invited the Croats and the Serbs, two strong tribes from beyond the Carpathian Mountains, to settle in land held by the Avars in the northwestern Balkans. As vassals of Byzantium, they took control of Dalmatia and then of territory that was thereafter called Croatia and Serbia.

THE SCHISM BETWEEN GREEK AND LATIN CHRISTENDOM

The Christian community in Europe had once been a united political entity, the Roman Empire, with one undivided church. Even before the founding of Constantinople in 330 AD certain cultural and linguistic differences emerged between the Greek (Eastern) and Latin (Western) halves of Christendom. The foundation of the German kingdoms in the West in the following centuries added an element of political disunity to Christian Europe. The political schism between East and West occurred in 800 when the pope crowned Charlemagne Holy Roman Emperor in denial of Byzantine claims.

What has traditionally been considered the definitive break between the Greek and Roman branches of the church occurred in 1054 when mutual excommunications took place of papal legates and of Patriarch Cerularius at the Church of St. Sophia in Constantinople. But even this the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1983), 37.

ecclesiastical schism and the mutual distrust engendered by the first crusades did not irreparably damage relations between East and West. Western travellers on their way to Jerusalem continued to be well received in the Greek East.

The mounting hostility between East and West became a permanent feature after the Fourth Crusade. In 1204, the Latin army, led by the Venetians, and under the guise of a holy crusade, sacked Constantinople and carved up the Byzantine Empire, forcibly imposing Roman Catholicism on the Greek people. The Venetians were undoubtedly motivated by greed and the desire to destroy their most competitive trading rival. In his book Byzantine East & Latin West, Deno John Geanakoplos states that the Fourth Crusade destroyed Greco-Latin relations:

...the growing animosity of the Greeks for the Latins was transformed into a mass revulsion, a permanent hostility that permeated every level of society and was to poison all subsequent relations between the two peoples. It is at this point, when the ecclesiastical schism became ethnic and political as well as religious in scope, that the break between the two churches may be said to have been truly consummated.⁶

As we shall demonstrate, the hostility between the Greek and Latin churches was to profoundly affect relations between the Croatian and Serbian peoples.

MEDIEVAL CROATIA AND SERBIA

The demarcation line between the Roman and Byzantine civilizations, the Roman Catholic and Greek-Orthodox churches, and the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires has separated Serbs and Croats for centuries. Although these two peoples speak the same language and came

⁶ Deno John Geanakoplos, Byzantine East & Latin West: Two Worlds of Christendom in Middle Ages and Renaissance. Studies in Ecclesiastical and Cultural History (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 1-2.

to the Balkans during the same period in history, they experienced quite separate historical developments.

Croatia was flourishing economically and culturally in the tenth and eleventh centuries, but began to experience serious difficulties when it found itself squeezed between the Hungarians advancing from the north to the Adriatic and the Venetians advancing from the south. In 1102 the Croats were forced to accept the suzerainty of the Hungarians and since then Croatia has embraced Catholicism and come under the influence of the Vatican. Despite the Hungarian occupation of Croatia, Croat nobles continued to govern their own internal affairs. When the Ottomans defeated the Magyars at Mahacs in 1526, seizing a good portion of Hungarian lands, the Croat nobility put the province under the protection of the Hapsburg Emperor.

Vienna viewed Croatia as a strategic military outpost against the Ottomans and crucial to its survival. Croatian independence was suppressed so as to serve the interests of the Holy Roman Empire. The authority of the Croatian parliament (or estates) was restricted in order to form the "military frontiers" over which the Emperor himself had sole authority. As the Hapsburg's war against the Ottomans pushed southeastward in the years after 1683, liberating Hungary and Slavonia-Srem, the border territories were settled by new Serb immigrants who had fled from the Ottomans in Serbia into Croatia and Vojvodina which were thus added to these "military frontiers".

Hundreds of thousands of Serbs moved out of the Ottoman empire and into the regions of Krajina and Slavonia in the seventeenth century. They were well received by Austrian authorities, given free land, various

privileges, and a high level of autonomy, with the obligation to defend the borders. They were ruled directly from Vienna and were never subordinate to any Croatian authorities.

Serbia continued its existence and even expanded first under Stevan Nemanji and later under Dushan the Mighty, when in 1345 it became an empire which included Thessaly, Epirus and Albania. After the death of Dushan, the Serbian state was unable to withstand an Ottoman invasion. Following defeat by the Ottomans at Marica (1371) and Kosovo (1389), Serbia endured five hundred years of vassalage under the Ottoman empire. The battle of Kosovo was later to become a significant memory for Serbian nationalism. Serbian folk songs and poetry still emphasize a Serbian moral superiority over the Ottomans. Serbs still celebrate the battle of Kosovo as their national holiday.

The memory of the battle of Kosovo has played an important role in preserving Serbian national identity. The Serbian church romanticized Kosovo and would relate the story to their parishioners. The death of the Serbian prince Lazar, executed by the Ottomans after the battle, was used by the church to symbolize the atonement for all the sins of Serbia (those sins that had brought the wrath of God against Serbia and had made the Serbs lose their independence). By placing such a strong emphasis on the teaching of the battle of Kosovo, the church was able to maintain the memory of Serbian independence. In addition to teaching the legend of Prince Lazar and the battle of Kosovo in church, it was also expressed in Serbian epic poetry and continues to be taught in Serbian schools. By keeping this legend alive, the Serbians were not only able to hold onto their national identity, they were also being taught that it was acceptable

to fight against tyranny (in this case represented by the Ottoman empire). Kosovo has become the symbol for all Serbian national movements, whether the movement be anti-Ottoman or anti-Croatian.⁷

Serbs have always had a strong sense of national unity, even under the Ottomans. Each Serbian village was governed directly by the traditional chief or *knez* and groups of villages elected representatives to deal with Ottoman authorities. The preservation of local government served to foster Serb rebellion, as did the various groups of outlaws who roamed the mountains and preyed on travellers. The Serbian church, with its patriarchate at Pec was also a reminder of national unity. The Serbs rose in rebellion several times during the Ottoman occupation. One major revolt took place in 1593 and was not quashed until 1606. The Serbian Patriarchate was abolished by the Ottomans in 1766 and the Serbian church was put directly under the authority of the Greek Patriarch in Constantinople.

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The Ottoman Empire first established itself on the European mainland in 1354. As an active and aggressive military organization comprised of dedicated frontier warriors, the Ottoman armies took Adrianople (Edirne) in 1362, making it their capital. From this centre the Ottoman armies moved up the Maritsa and Vardar valleys against the Christian states of the Balkans and marched into Europe virtually unchecked; in 1453 they took control of Constantinople. The empire now held most of Serbia, Bosnia, Bulgaria and Greece. Although some isolated areas still resisted, no major centre of opposition remained. Constantinople (Istanbul) became

⁷ Thomas A. Emmert, Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389 (Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs, 1990), 121.

the capital of the empire.

It is important to emphasize that, in this case, the conquering power was a Muslim state. Ottoman leaders divided their peoples by religion and not nationality. An individual could join the ruling group by converting to Islam. A large proportion of the Slavic population converted to Islam during the centuries of Ottoman occupation.⁸ Non-Muslims were divided into religious communities called millets: Orthodox, Gregorian Armenian, Roman Catholic and Jewish. Each group was under the direction of its own religious head. Thus, for the Balkan people, the vast majority of whom were Orthodox, the titular leader was the patriarch of Constantinople. In practice, however, the Balkan Orthodox church organization became divided into its national components. For example, the Serbians had their own patriarchate at Pec and the Bulgarians had a metropolitanate at Ohrid. National separateness was preserved through ecclesiastical organizations.

The principal interest of Ottoman officials in the Balkans was the collection of taxes to pay for the military and civil administration of the empire. As only Muslims could hold office in the empire or serve in the military forces, many Balkan Christians converted, eventually forming a large part of the military and administrative apparatus of the state. However, the highest civil and military officials were the children of Christian subjects taken from the Balkan provinces through a tribute of children levied only in that part of the empire. Specially educated for the sultan's service, they depended on his favour for their advancement and

⁸ Steven L. Burg, The Political Integration of Yugoslavia's Muslims: Determinants of Success and Failure (Pittsburgh: The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1983), 3. Burg states that, for the most part, Islamization was voluntary and peaceful.

could be discharged or executed at his will.⁹

The subordinate position of all non-Muslims was constantly emphasized. They were forced to carry an unequal share of the tax burden of the empire. Although non-Muslims were not subject to military conscription, they were assessed a special tax as a replacement. They also were liable to other services and payments, particularly in times of war, which were attributes of their secondary status within the state. This secondary status was accorded only to Christians and Jews because they were considered "people of the book" and, thus, considered as superior to heathens. Despite these and other severe disabilities, there were relatively few examples of mass conversions, with the exception of those that occurred in Bosnia, Albania and Crete.

Despite the long existence of the empire, signs of weakness appeared in its structure as early as the reign of Suleyman (1494-1566). The Ottoman system could not function well without good direction from the top. Until Suleyman, the state had been remarkably fortunate in its rulers, but among the 17 sultans that followed, few were men of ability. With the lack of direction from the top, the administration became increasingly more inept and corrupt.

Christians, together with their Muslim neighbours, were directly affected by the decline of the Ottoman administration. Among the most severe consequences of the breakdown of the Ottoman government was the rise of lawlessness throughout the peninsula. As the central authority grew weaker, local Muslim leaders throughout the empire established what were in effect small principalities from which they were able to defy

⁹ Robert Lee Wolff, The Balkans in Our Time (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 59.

Istanbul and make war among themselves. Christian bands of robbers also existed in large numbers. Their activities, together with the destruction caused by the Ottoman wars of the eighteenth century, made certain areas uninhabitable for long periods. The Serbians particularly suffered from the corruption and lawlessness of the time. Their lands were the scene of repeated struggles between local Muslem leaders in addition to the Ottoman battles against the encroaching armies of Austria, Venice, Poland and Russia.

THE RISE OF BALKAN NATIONALISM

In Balkan history the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars mark the shift from the long period of Ottoman domination into the era of the national revolutions of the nineteenth century. To some extent, the stage had been set in the eighteenth century, when both Russia and Austria appealed to the Balkan subject populations for assistance against the Ottoman Empire. It was through these wars that the weakness of the Ottoman military became known. Moreover, Balkan nationals who had fought in these wars had learned modern military methods and were armed. Equally important, the period of war and internal upset had opened the area to outside influences. The national and liberal ideologies of revolutionary France provided a program that would allow Balkan leaders to combat not only Ottoman political control but also the stifling cultural influence of their Christian church hierarchies.

Balkans leaders did not receive the support of other European powers, however. After the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), the Great Powers (Austria, Russia, France, and Great Britain) desired social and political stability. Revolutionary methods and liberal-national programs were not

encouraged. Subject Christian peoples could no longer expect aid or sympathy from abroad. At the same time, it was also apparent to the European powers that the Ottoman Empire was in a dangerous condition of internal decay and military weakness. The question of the fate of the Ottoman territories and of the control of that government became perhaps the most important single diplomatic problem for Europe in the century after the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815). This issue, the so-called "Eastern Question", was the direct cause of the Crimean War and World War I.

Despite a lack of support from abroad, the Balkan peoples rose in rebellion against Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian rule. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Hapsburgs ruled the northwestern part of the Balkans, while the Ottomans dominated the main, central, and southern regions of the peninsula. The development of a national renaissance among the Balkan peoples varied according to the different political and social conditions prevailing in these areas: political development occurred under the Hapsburgs, and revolutionary upheavals predominated under the Ottomans.

With the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of World War I, it became possible for a Yugoslavian state to be formed. This state was made up of different ethnic and religious groups, but having a definite Serbian majority. The constitutional structure of the new state was decided upon in 1921 by a constituent assembly that adopted a centralist constitution despite Croatian objections. The Croatian Peasant Party of Stjepan Radic, which emerged as the most powerful political group in Croatia after the introduction of universal male suffrage in the new state, refused to support the new constitution. Although he wanted a federated

republican state, Radic was an opportunist, allowing Croatian Peasant Party deputies to sit in the Yugoslav parliament. At a turbulent session of parliament in 1928, Radic was shot and killed by a Montenegrin deputy.

It was at this point that Alexander I, the former prince regent of Serbia (1914-1921) and king of Yugoslavia, decided that parliamentary government had become impossible. In 1929 he set up a dictatorship, putting severe restrictions on the press and dissolving all political parties. In 1931 he divided the country into nine administrative provinces, with the object of breaking down old provincial loyalties. While visiting Marseilles in 1934, however, the king was assassinated. Alexander had believed that his rule would prevent political chaos in Yugoslavia; instead it contributed to the turmoil.

After 1933, as fascist and Nazi ideologies became widespread in neighbouring countries, fascists began to infiltrate the Croatian Peasant Party. In 1939, Radic's successor Vladimir Macek, undertook secret negotiations with Italy with the object of creating a separate Croatian state. The Yugoslav government thereupon reached an agreement with the Croatian Peasant Party, whose terms united Dalmatia, Croatia and a small part of Bosnia into a single province called the *banovina* of Croatia. This agreement satisfied neither the Croats or the Serbs.

On March 25, 1941, Yugoslavia signed the Tripartite Pact, allying itself with Hitler. Two days later, a bloodless coup d'état took place in Belgrade, led by the Serbian general Dusan Simovic. In response, the Germans attacked Belgrade and the Italians attacked Dalmatia; Hungarian and Bulgarian troops also invaded the country. The Yugoslav army surrendered within two weeks.

Croatia welcomed the invading German armies and accepted Ante Pavelic as its leader. Pavelic had been espousing Croatian nationalism since the 1920s when he helped to form the Croatian National Movement. It was in the atmosphere of Serbian domination under King Alexander that the Croatian independence movement defined its program. Evidence of fascist influence was also very strong. While attending a conference in Paris, Pavelic was warmly received by representatives of Benito Mussolini who offered to support the military training of his Croat nationalist followers. Training camps for Pavelic's Ustashi movement were set up in Bovigno, Vichetto, Borgotaro, San Fontecchio and San Demetrio. The Ustashi were considered the para-military wing of the Croatian Nationalist Party. Pavelic also followed a racial ideology, believing the Croats were Aryan in origin, therefore having no place in a Pan-Slavic state.¹⁰

Besides being influenced by the Nazis' anti-Semitic and racist ideology, Pavelic was also fanatically anti-Serbian and pro-Catholic. Anti-Serbian sentiment had already been expressed throughout the nineteenth century when Croatian intellectuals began to make plans for their own national state. They viewed the presence of more than one million Serbs in Krajina and Slavonia as intolerable. While some Croats saw the solution in the creation of a common Yugoslav state with the Serbs and Slovenes, most believed that Orthodox Serbs must somehow be eliminated, either through converting them to Catholicism or by expelling them. As the leader of a Croatian nationalist party, Pavelic had inherited a rich tradition of extreme anti-Serbian sentiment.¹¹ The dominance of Pavelic's Ustashi and the

¹⁰ Pavelic once explained to Hitler that the Croats "were not Slavs at all. They were Goths in origin, and the idea of them being Slavs had been forced upon them." Pavelic, quoted in Vladimir Dedijer, Ivan Bozic, Sima Cirkovic and Milorad Ekmecic, History of Yugoslavia (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974), 577.

¹¹ Vladimir Dedijer, The Yugoslav Auschwitz and the Vatican (Buffalo, N.Y.:

Axis victory in Yugoslavia would spell disaster for both the Serbian and Jewish populations.

By May 1941 Yugoslavia was divided among the Axis powers and ceased to exist as a state. Germany occupied Northern Slovenia, the Banat and Serbia. Hungary acquired Backa and Baranja, the remaining two sections of the Vojvodina, and several smaller adjacent areas. Italy annexed Southern Slovenia and most of the Dalmatian littoral and also occupied a considerable portion of the interior regions in the south, bordering on Albania. Bulgaria acquired most of Macedonia. The remaining territory, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, was handed over to the Croatian nationalists and became the Independent State of Croatia.¹²

THE KILLING OF JEWS IN THE INDEPENDENT STATES OF CROATIA AND SERBIA, 1939-1945

In Serbia, Nazi authorities immediately set up their genocidal policy against the Jewish population. On May 30, 1941, German authorities in Belgrade issued a definition of who was a Jew, removed all Jews from public service and the professions, made it mandatory to register all Jewish property, introduced forced labour, forbade any citizen to hide Jews, and forced all Jews to wear a yellow star.

By July, Jews were being arrested and a number put to death in retaliation for Communist activities. In August several concentration camps were set up and a systematic round-up of Jewish men began all over Serbia and in the Banat. In October some 4,000 Jewish men were

Prometheus Books, 1992), 10. Dedijer also argues that this extreme anti-Serbianism played a large role in the nationalist Croatian mass movement in 1970-1971 and in the ruling Croatian Democratic Community of 1990.

¹² See map on page 4.

shot by the German army. Women and children were also rounded up and sent to Sajmiste, a concentration camp erected in Zemun across the river from Belgrade. During the spring and summer of 1942, more than 6,000 women and children were killed in gas vans. By August 1942 Serbia was declared *judenrein*.

In the Independent State of Croatia, it was the Ustashi who implemented anti-Jewish policies. Discriminatory regulations, similar to those in Serbia, were issued as early as April 30, 1941. The Ustashi began killing large numbers of Croatian and Bosnian Jews in the summer of 1941. Sarajevo's Jews disappeared by August 1942; Zagreb's in 1944. Most were sent to concentration camps, the most notorious being the torture camp of Jasenovac where Jews and other "undesirable elements" were interned and more often murdered. It was located in a small city in Slavonia near the Bosnian border and was the largest camp set up by the Croatian government. Those who did not die in Jasenovac were deported to Auschwitz or other death camps. By the end of 1944, the only Jews to remain on Croatian territory were those who were recognized as "honorary Aryans": Jewish partners in mixed marriages, and children of intermarriages.

Approximately 55, 000 to 60, 000 of Yugoslavia's Jews, nearly eighty percent of the region's prewar Jewish population, were murdered in the Holocaust.¹³

THE KILLING OF GYPSIES IN SERBIA AND CROATIA, 1941-1945

Gypsies had been living in the Balkans since the thirteenth century. By the twentieth century, the majority of Gypsies living in Croatia and Serbia had given up their nomadism in favour of a more sedentary lifestyle and

¹³ Harriet Z. Pass Freidenreich, The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 190-193.

were well-established in villages. When World War II broke out, many Gypsies in Croatia and Slovenia sought refuge in Italy, where they were interned and deported to Sardinia. Others were detained at Puglia, though many escaped, some choosing to join the partisans. Those who entered Italy after the creation of the Independent State of Croatia in 1941 were sheltered in detention camps by the Italians in order to keep them from recrossing into Yugoslavia in search of relatives. Many of them were given Italian identity cards to put them further beyond the reach of the Nazis and the Ustashi in 1943.¹⁴

Like the Jews, Gypsies were also viewed by the Nazis and the Ustashi officials of the Independent State of Croatia as "racially inferior" and targeted for extermination. In Croatia, under the Decree No. 13-542 of the Ministry of the Interior, all Gypsies had to register with the police on 22-23 July 1941. Thereafter, Gypsy businesses and other property were confiscated and "Aryanized". Between 1941 and 1943 most of Croatia's Gypsies were put into Ustashi-manned concentration camps like Jasenovak, Tenje, and Satra Gradska.¹⁵ By the summer of 1942, these Gypsies, like those in Serbia, were being transported to camps for "medical" experimentation and more systematic extermination at Auschwitz and other camps outside Yugoslavia.¹⁶

Many Gypsies were also executed in reprisal for Chetnik or Partisan activities within Croatia. Since Gypsies were often not welcome in the

¹⁴ Dennis Reinharz, "Damnation of the Outsider: The Gypsies of Croatia and Serbia in the Balkan Holocaust, 1941-1945" in The Gypsies of Eastern Europe, David Crowe and John Kolski, eds. (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1991), 84.

¹⁵ Ibid., 88.

¹⁶ For a description of the extermination of Gypsies within Auschwitz, see Ian Hancock, The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution (Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987), 74-78.

Chetnik organization, many joined the Partisans and sometimes formed their own resistance groups in the mountain regions. Approximately 26,000 Gypsies were murdered by the Ustashi in the Independent State of Croatia.

At the time of the German occupation of Serbia, over 100,000 Gypsies lived in Serbia, with 10,000 in Belgrade alone. Gypsies were defined by the Nazis as those having at least three Gypsy grandparents and were viewed as racially inferior. The local German commander Staatsrat Harald Turner, chief of civil administration and an SS Gruppenführer under General Franz Böhme, the commander of troops within Serbia, stated:

The Gypsy cannot, by reason of his inner and outer makeup, be a useful member of international society...As a matter of principle it must be said that the Jews and the Gypsies represent an element of insecurity and thus a danger to public order and safety.¹⁷

As in Croatia, Gypsies were targeted in reprisal for resistance activity. Others were put into concentration camps and forced to work as grave diggers. Over 20,000 Gypsies perished in the Semlin camp alone. Fortunately, the Germans only controlled about one third of the Gypsy population within Serbia, as the majority succeeded in fleeing the region or in joining the resistance.¹⁸

THE MASSACRE OF SERBS IN THE INDEPENDENT STATE OF CROATIA

The establishment of the Independent State of Croatia in 1941 provided Croats with the opportunity to murder hundreds of thousands of Serbs. This was a genocide by Croatian Roman Catholics, often with Muslim support, against Serbian Orthodox Christians. The religious side to this genocide should not be underrated. Catholic priests took part in the

¹⁷ Staatsrat Harald Turner, quoted in Reinhartz "Damnation of the Outsider", 89.

¹⁸ Reinhartz, "Damnation of the Outsider", 88-89.

killings and conducted ceremonies of forced conversion. Although Serbs could sometimes escape being killed if they converted to Catholicism, conversion was in no way a guarantee they would not be killed by the Ustashi. There is also evidence that these killings were condoned by high levels of the Catholic hierarchy.¹⁹

When Pavelic's government took power in Croatia, the Ustashi began mass arrests of Jews, Gypsies and Serbs. In accordance with their ideas of racial purity and the nation, these groups were singled out for annihilation. Croats who had expressed an anti-fascist stance were also targeted and, like Serbs, Jews and Gypsies, sent to concentration camps. Most Serbs were sent to Jasenovac where over 750,000 people, mostly Orthodox Serbs, were murdered.²⁰ The exact number of people murdered at Jasenovac will never be known. Besides the obvious problems of documentation and the fact that many of the victims were cremated so as not to leave evidence behind, most of the victims were buried in mass graves on the banks of the Save river, where their bones are being uncovered even today when water levels are low. Thousands were also murdered and then thrown directly into the Save which then carried the bodies down river into Belgrade and sometimes even into the Danube.

¹⁹ Vladimir Dedijer, The Yugoslav Auschwitz and the Vatican, trans. Harvey L. Kendall (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1992). Dedijer gives countless examples of the Catholic clergy's direct involvement in organizing massacres and/or condoning these massacres. For example, he cites the case of Brale Bozidar, Roman Catholic pastor in Sarajevo, who headed the Ustashi in that city. Brale acted with the approval of his superior, Archbishop Saric, who promoted him to the position of honorary head of the archbishopric of Upper Bosnia one month after he assumed leadership of the Ustashi. After the war, Brale was found guilty of war crimes by the High Court for Bosnia, having instigated, commanded and organized the arrest, torture, forced emigration, and transport of Serbs and Jews to concentration camps (176-179).

²⁰ For more discussion of sources used to uncover Croatian atrocities at Jasenovac, see Ibid., 54-56.

The Ustashi were not particular in their choice of weapons: they used revolvers, carbines, machine guns, knives, axes, hatchets, wooden hammers, iron bars, iron hammers, hoes, belts and leather whips, hanging, burning, trampling, freezing, poison gas, suffocation and starvation to kill their victims.²¹ The killings were so bloody that German Nazis, not normally very sensitive in this regard, protested their brutality.²² The victims included men, women and children.

There is evidence that the Nazis planned to use Serbia and Croatia as a place for repopulation by Germans, once they had finished killing the Jewish and Gypsy population. Serbs would either be resettled elsewhere or annihilated. Serbs, as Slavs, were viewed by the Nazis as racially inferior. Although the Independent State of Croatia took an active role in the killing of Serbs, it was done with the approval and, often, with the active participation, of Nazi officials.²³

THE RESISTANCE

The centuries old Balkan tradition of guerilla warfare and banditry facilitated the transition from standing army to resistance fighters. For example, instead of facing surrender and internment, many Serbian officers and their men fled to the forests to await the moment when they could fight again. The region's geography is extremely suitable for guerilla warfare and accounts for much of the success that the resistance had against the occupying Axis powers. There were two resistance forces

²¹ Ibid., 267.

²² Gottfried Niemietz, "Editor's Preface" in Ibid., 27.

²³ Vladimir Dedijer, Ivan Bozic, Sima Circovik and Milorad Ekmecic, History of Yugoslavia (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1974), 577-579.

operating in Serbia and Croatia: the loyalist Chetniks and the communist Partisans. Both guerilla organizations were fighting the Axis powers, but they were too ideologically at odds to succeed in joining forces.

The Chetniks began their struggle as early as May 1941. Draza Mihailovich, with the support of the government-in-exile and the Allies, led the Chetniks into the mountains in Ravna Gora to wage war against the Nazis and the Ustashi. Mihailovich, a Serbian, was an ardent monarchist and his supporters tended toward an ultra-conservative ideology. The Chetniks were most active in Nazi-occupied Serbia.

Within months, Josip Broz Tito, a leading member of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, emerged as the head of the Partisans. Backed by the Soviets and the Comintern, Tito and his followers sought a united socialist Yugoslavia where ethnic divisions would be erased in favour of the state. At first the Axis powers underestimated the numbers and skill of the resistance forces. By September of 1941, Chetnik and Partisan attacks had become such a threat that orders were issued for reprisals against the civilian population in response to Serb ambushes. For every German soldier killed, 100 civilian hostages were to be executed; for every soldier injured, 50 civilians were to be killed. One particularly brutal reprisal took place in October 1941. In response to a Chetnik ambush, Nazi commander Major König rounded up the entire male population of Kragujevac, including several hundred school boys from grade five and up. 7000 men and boys were gunned down by machine guns in a field just outside of town.

Ultimately, the Partisans were the most successful and aggressive of the two resistance groups, committed to a strategy of ceaseless struggle against the occupiers, no matter what the cost. Mihailovich, in addition to

his obvious concern over Nazi reprisals, became increasingly convinced that the Partisans were an even worse enemy than the Nazis. The Chetniks even participated in joint actions with both the Germans and the Italians against the Partisans in 1942. Mihailovich lost British support for his cause in 1943 and was ultimately discredited; his Chetnik organization eventually disintegrated.

There is no doubt that the Partisans participated in the massacre of civilians during and after the war. Ustashi forces and anyone deemed a supporter of the Ustashi, including entire villages, were targeted by the Partisans. As the end of the war drew near, the number of such massacres increased alarmingly.²⁴

YUGOSLAVIA UNDER TITO

When the Yugoslav communists took power under Tito in spring of 1945, they displayed a great degree of self-confidence in both their domestic and foreign policies. The Tito regime launched an ambitious industrialization programme preceded by the most rapid and sweeping nationalization programme in Eastern Europe. Tito also displayed independence from Soviet control in his foreign policy, most notably during the Greek civil war where he was the chief supporter of the communists. This brash display of independence led Stalin to realize that Tito could become a serious threat to his control of Eastern Europe. This fear was the main reason for Tito's expulsion from the Soviet Bloc in 1948 after he refused to play "follow the leader".

Tito's confidence that he would continue to receive widespread internal

²⁴ For a discussion of atrocities committed by the Partisans, see Krarpanzich, The Bloodiest Yugoslav Spring, 1945: Tito's Katyns and Gulags (New York: Carlton Press, 1980), passim.

support rested to a large degree on his knowledge that his own aims were in relative harmony with the nationalist aspirations of the peoples of Yugoslavia. What he offered was protection from traditional enemies: the Slovenes from Italy and Germany; the Croats from Italy and Serbia; and the Macedonians from Greece and Serbia, but also from Bulgaria. The Serbs, however, received less than the total dominance they had previously enjoyed in the pre-war kingdom. Therein lie the seeds for the Serbian backlash which, following the Tito era, characterizes the contemporary scene.²⁵

Although many contemporary authors point to the Tito era as the root of the present day conflict in the former Yugoslavia, we argue that the roots are, in fact, much deeper. The main reason for Tito's success in keeping peace in this region was his complete monopoly over the use of force and the constant threat of using that force should anyone dare to break with the union. Although we agree that the Tito era does have an influence over the present conflict, a more in depth study of this period is not within the scope of this paper.

THE ABUSE OF HISTORY

In light of recent events in the former Yugoslavia, the history of this region may seem remote and unimportant. One must remember, however, that the players in this conflict justify their actions by looking to the past. History is regularly distorted and brought back to life as a means of fanning the flames of nationalism and ethnic hatred.

During a visit to Zagreb in 1992, David Chirot came upon a book

²⁵ Christopher Cviic, Remaking the Balkans (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Pinter Publishers, 1991), 26-27.

entitled Historical Maps of Croatia, published on behalf of the government of Croatia in 1992, that claims that Croatia was first mentioned in 500 B.C. on an inscription of Darius the Great of Persia.²⁶ In reality, Croatia does not appear in recorded history until more than a thousand years later. The claim that Croats are somehow descended from the Persians stems from the desire on the part of Croatian nationalists to separate themselves from the Serbs despite the fact that the two groups are linguistically almost identical. During World War II, the myth of Persian roots made it possible for Croatian fascists to identify themselves as Aryans, to ally themselves with the Nazis, and to provide a "pseudo-scientific basis" for the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Serbs. It is also interesting that Historical Maps of Croatia omits any mention of the Croatian massacre of Serbs in World War II and chooses to cite only cases of massacres committed by Serbs.

Serbian extremists have exploited Croatia's insensitivity toward its fascist past and have used it to promote the idea that Serbs in Croatia face another Jasenovac unless they fight back. Serbs have also been guilty of "historical mystification" based on distorted demographic and linguistic claims and calls for revenge. In both Croatia and Serbia these historical myths are being promoted, not by illiterate peasants, but by highly educated intellectuals. They are taught in schools and celebrated by national holidays.²⁷

As we have demonstrated, this region has a long history of solving conflict with armed struggle. It also has an alarming tradition of massacring civilians in times of war. It is in such countries with a history

²⁶ David Chiot, Modern Tyrants: The Power and Prevalence of Evil in Our Age (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 423-425.

²⁷ Ibid.

of accepting violence as a means of solving conflict that further violations of gross human rights are likely to occur. Any efforts at prevention and intervention might well take cognizance of such historical roots of settling conflict by violent means.

THE WESTERN MEDIA

The war in the former Yugoslavia figures prominently as one of the top news stories carried by the Western media this decade. As this paper has argued, the media often give a distorted view of this war by failing to provide an adequate historical background to these events. In addition, the media has also failed in its reporting by providing an imbalanced and biased view. In his article "Dateline Yugoslavia: The Partisan Press", Peter Brock argues that the Western media, particularly in the United States, has demonstrated a strong anti-Serbian bias in its reporting. According to Brock, the media have fostered this bias in an effort to generate the political pressure needed to force American military intervention.

Despite the evidence that Muslims and Croats have acted just as abominably in this conflict, Serbians are singled out as the major perpetrator of the carnage in the former Yugoslavia. Atrocities where the victims were Serbs often go unreported. Brock provides dozens of examples where the press has distorted and/or failed to report such stories. For example, in its January 4, 1993 issue, Newsweek published a photo of several bodies with an accompanying story entitled: "Is there any way to stop Serbian atrocities in Bosnia?" The photo was, in fact, of Serb victims.²⁸

²⁸ Peter Brock, "Dateline Yugoslavia: The Partisan Press." Foreign Policy. No. 93 (Winter 1993-1994), 154.

Although it may be true that the American media have slanted the perception of the war to advance their own agenda, the circumstances under which reporters in the field operate leave little doubt as to why it is difficult to get the media to report the truth about wars in foreign places. Western news media rarely send in correspondents who speak the native language(s) of the areas to which they are sent. As a result, these same correspondents rely heavily on interpreters who, in the case of the former Yugoslavia, are usually working for the government (Croat or Serb) or have established allegiances with that government.

Moreover, these same governments are not always strong on the concept of granting absolute freedom to the press. For example, the government of Croatia resurrected old communist laws that mandated five years imprisonment for anyone, citizen or foreigner, who dared criticize the government. For those Western journalists who wanted to remain in Zagreb, the message was clear: they could not report atrocities that were committed by Croatian forces, nor could they risk any criticism of the Croatian government.²⁹ Journalists in Serbia were not faced with such restrictions, but encountered such hostility from the Serbian government that their reporting tended to be antagonistic toward that government. Brock states: "[c]oming from Western culture, they were accustomed to patronage, cooperation, access, and answers. But isolated and denounced, the Belgrade government simply ignored their harangues. So, as some reporters admitted...they wrote what they wanted, often in adversarial tones."³⁰

The behaviour of Western journalists in the former Yugoslavia raises

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

serious concerns about the media's accountability in their reporting of world conflicts. Because the western media have tremendous influence in shaping world public opinion, questions must arise as to the extent to which public opinion has been prejudiced by the media's bias. Another question which needs to be addressed is whether or not this has affected Western governments and the United Nations in their efforts to enforce and negotiate peace in this region. Unfortunately, these questions may not be answered for some time.

CONCLUSION

At the time of writing, the fate of the former Yugoslavia has not yet been decided. However, what is already clear is that gross human rights violations have been, and continue to be, committed by all sides. This paper has attempted to sketch, with broad strokes, some of the historical background against which current events must be understood. The news media do not usually supply such background information without which current events can only be misinterpreted. The burden of history hangs very heavy over this beautiful country and, unfortunately, none of the ethnocentric and national movements will allow each other to forget it. Only time will tell to what lengths the perpetrators of "ethnic cleansing" will go. Some of the massacres and starvation regimes, imposed on people once considered fellow citizens, already approach the level of genocidal massacres. Whether any of the half-hearted efforts at intervention will re-establish some semblance of peace and normality in this unfortunate region remains to be seen, although the immediate future does not look very encouraging.

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